A Preservation Ideal

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Reprinted from *Historic Preservation*,
Vol. 28, No. 2, April-June, 1976
National Trust for Historic Preservation
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Washington, D.C. 20006

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From the preservation of Hasbrouck House and Mount Vernon (both memorials of George Washington) in the 1850s to the Historic Sites Act of 1935, the historic preservation movement in the United States focused on "associative monuments"—places that derive their importance from association with people, events and lifeways of the past. The motives for preservation were educational, inspirational and patriotic. In recent decades, however, we have come to recognize that in our preoccupation with associative monuments we have neglected another kind of landmark—the structure, district or vista that adds beauty and a sense of place to our daily surroundings. Thus today the preservation movement emphasizes adaptive use and preservation for environmental and aesthetic purposes. This has come to be called the new preservation.

The new preservation, however, does not make the old preservation obsolete. Americans still attach high value to the places where their history was made. They draw special satisfaction from visiting the battlefields of the nation's wars, the homes of its leaders and the great landmarks of national development. They try to recapture some sense of how life was for their forebears—famous, infamous or simply anonymous. They are especially moved by the knowledge that they are looking at the real thing, at original material and workmanship, at the very walls that Thomas Jefferson built at Monticello, at the very deck from which Admiral George Dewey directed the Battle of Manila Bay, at the very suit Abraham Lincoln wore when assassinated. They are moved by standing on the very ground once soaked by the blood of General Pickett's men who charged at Gettysburg or on the very spot where the Union Pacific and Central Pacific joined to span the nation with rails. To respond to the wish to understand and venerate the past, vicariously to relive history, preservationists still save the associative evidence of the past. Today more than half of the 300 parks administered by the National Park Service are historical or archaeological. The states administer another 800 to 900 associative monuments, and cities and counties some 300 more. There are no precise figures on the number of sites administered by the private sector, but a good guess is 10,000, counting museums as well as conventional historical parks.

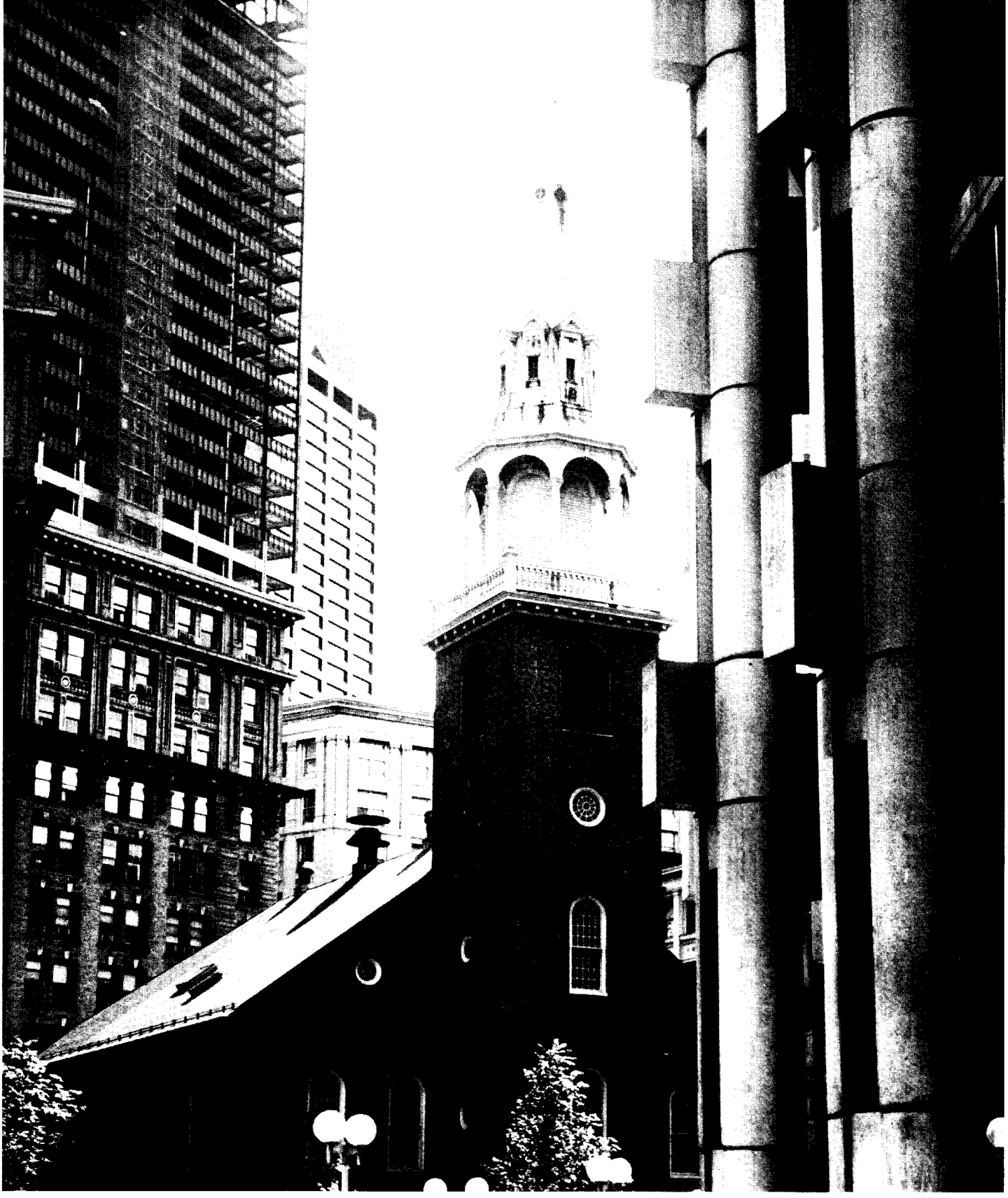
The principles and techniques governing the care and presentation of associative monuments are fairly well articulated and understood in historic preservation circles. In general they reflect international preservation concepts and practices except that Europeans and Asians, for example, are usually more concerned with artistic than associative values. American preservation principles also derive in large part from the experience of the federal government in carrying out the Antiquities Act of 1906 and the Historic Sites Act of 1935, and they are well expressed in the administrative policies of the National Park Service.

But at all levels of government and in the private sector there is a growing gulf between principle and practice. The explanation is in part ignorance of the principles, in part a scarcity of qualified specialists and administrators and in large part—perhaps a product of the hucksterism of the Civil War Centennial and the American Revolution Bicentennial—a rather juvenile impulse to recreate history.

Let us contrast principle and practice.

We call the features that make up a historical park historic resources. Historic resources are classified in three main categories—fabric, sites and historic scene. Fabric is what is built. Architecture is most commonly described as fabric, but there are many other kinds of historic structures, too, such as fences, bridges, dams, canals, earthworks, burial mounds, roads and even ponds and gardens. Fabric also includes monuments, statues and such portable artifacts as stagecoaches, rifles, buttons.

Opposite page: Old South Meetinghouse (1729-30), Boston, a historic site in a modern urban setting. (National Park Service)



Ellis Island in New York Harbor, an immigration station from 1892 to 1954 and now, after years of neglect, a candidate for restoration. (National Park Service, M. Woodbridge Williams)

Fabric, of course, is static, finite. Sites, by contrast, are natural ecosystems—terrain, forest, other vegetative ground cover and wildlife that together constituted the setting for historic events. Unlike fabric, sites are dynamic, self-renewing or renewable according to the laws of nature. Finally, the historic scene is the total of the sites, structures and objects that make up a historic ensemble.

Ideally, custodians of historic resources should operate primarily as stewards, charged with passing on unimpaired to future generations the irreplaceable evidences of past generations that temporarily have been entrusted to their care. All planning for development, interpretation and public use and all management activities should be founded on the concept of stewardship, should scrupulously respect the integrity of historic resources and place their preservation above all other purposes.

For care of fabric, the special affection Americans feel for original material and workmanship should be acknowledged. Preservation of original fabric is the prime goal. At best the deterioration of fabric can be slowed, for, like man himself, man's works cannot be made immortal. We must be discriminating in deciding whether to restore a structure to a past condition. One reason is that restoration work is expensive and painstaking. Another is that most structures express a continuum of history, rather than a frozen moment. The attempt to roll back fabric to a given moment in history is doomed almost by definition, and modifications that occurred over time may have values in themselves worthy of preservation. Accordingly, full restoration is favored only for such structures as Ford's Theatre and Mount Vernon whose historical associations or architectural qualities at a single period far surpass in value later associations or alterations. Other structures are best preserved in their existing forms, with whatever stabilization work or fabric replacement in kind is necessary to insure their perpetuation. Again depending on its values or its place in a historic ensemble, a building may be preserved or restored on the exterior to contribute to the historic scene while its interior is adapted to a modern function.

For treatment of sites, the dynamic character of natural ecosystems must be acknowledged. Because forest growth and other vegetative ground cover is not static, we cannot exactly duplicate historic conditions. But we can achieve and maintain, through careful natural resource management, the general visual aspect of the historic period. At Gettysburg, for example, we can insure that there will always be a copse of trees at the Bloody Angle, although the trees may not always be the exact size of those that were there in 1863. We can maintain forest growth at Spangler's Spring and peaches in the peach orchard. We can see that the forest does not advance into what at the historic moment were open meadows and thus interfere with vistas crucial to an understanding of the Gettysburg battle. But, by further example, we cannot duplicate the trenches at Petersburg or the earthen fortifications at Yorktown. Here, for obvi-

Canyon De Chelly National Monument (c. 300-1400), Chinle, Ariz., prehistoric Indian dwellings containing archaeological remains that have been preserved by the arid climate. (National Park Service, George Grant)

ous practical reasons, we must compromise with nature and cover with sod what strict historical accuracy would dictate to be exposed raw earth.

For preservation of the historic scene, a historic place and its environment should be kept as free as possible of inharmonious modern developments. Obviously, since we live in a modern world, this is an ideal that must be compromised with other needs. Independence Hall, Bunker Hill and Sutter's Fort are now in the midst of modern cities and must survive within these surroundings. Even in more insulated situations, the modern world will inevitably intrude, if only in the form of the public and the facilities for their accommodation. But we should aim always to minimize the effect of the intrusion and to harmonize modern facilities with the historic ambiance.

Most associative monuments in the United States have interpretive programs of one kind or another. A program may simply be a park official talking formally or informally to visitors, or it may include a museum, audiovisual presentation, publications, markers, labels and signs. Although historic resources may be eloquent in themselves, sensitively planned and carried out interpretation can greatly enhance the visitor's understanding and appreciation of the resources and the intangible values they represent.

Finally, preservationists must acknowledge a high obligation to be honest and accurate in all that we do. This means research. Master plans for park development and management must be based on knowledge of the location and significance of park resources. Restoration projects must summon sufficient historical, architectural and archaeological data to permit maximum accuracy and minimum conjecture. Management plans for natural resources cannot properly be formulated without documented historic ground cover maps. And interpretation not buttressed by the best professional thought and study is simply dishonest to the public. Any park should be able to demonstrate the accuracy of its preservation, restoration and interpretation.

Such is the theory. Practice increasingly diverges from theory. Planners and administrators of parks, be the parks federal, state, local or private, seem driven by certain pressures, or "urges," to do things that depart from the ideal. These urges, which are usually subconscious, can be identified under four major headings.

First is the urge not to fool with Mother Nature. This is the naturalist syndrome and it is most prevalent in agencies that manage both natural and historical parks. Officials afflicted by this urge usually come from backgrounds in natural park administration and tend to equate historic resources with old buildings. They have great difficulty seeing the trees and bushes and grass and rocks as historic too. Thus they rarely can bring themselves to tamper with what God hath wrought, even though in historical parks the goal is to display what man hath wrought—and the setting in which he wrought it. We are interested not so much in how Mother Nature, left to her own

devices, would manage these resources as in how they looked at a particular time in history. Natural resources on historic sites must be regarded as historic resources and managed for our purposes rather than Mother Nature's.

Next is the urge to beautify. The cosmetic syndrome is the opposite of the Mother Nature syndrome. It is found among people who see history not as it was but as they would like for it to have been. The results can be observed in lavishly furnished residences of notables who would have known such surroundings only in their private fantasies, in impeccably manicured grounds and gardens that in their heyday were quite unkempt if tended at all, in battlefields that look like the creations of amply funded and hyperactive landscape architects and in well-scrubbed, brightly painted historic communities that resemble sets of Hollywood musicals more than they do the dirty, smelly, often seedy aspects of historical reality. The romanticizers must be rigorously opposed, and the injunction to respect truth in all that we do must be scrupulously honored.

Third is the urge to develop. This is the self-glorification syndrome. It is characterized by a compulsion, however subconscious, to erect monuments to ourselves rather than to enhance the monuments that have been entrusted to our care. It is natural to want to create something for which one will be remembered by posterity, but in a historical park we *are* posterity and it is another generation's work that we are remembering. Thus, the first question to ask is not where to place the visitor center but whether one is needed at all. If it is, the question then becomes how to situate and design it so as to interfere least with the park's historic resources. The same is true of roads, parking lots, lodging and maintenance facilities and other visitor accommodations. Visitors come to see the works of the past, not the works of today. In parks the best modern works are those that compete the least with the historic attractions. It might almost be said that the more unmemorable the modern work, the more successful it is as a park development.

The final urge, to tell a story, is another dimension of the self-glorification syndrome. It is characterized by dramatic presentations in which flashy gimmickry takes precedence over substance and by publications, museums and audiovisual productions in which design overwhelms content. The success of interpretive programs in the United States has led us too frequently to view interpretation as an end in itself, to forget that it is the servant and not the master of the resource, that indeed it finds its very justification in the resource. Our purpose is not simply to tell a story. That may be done anywhere by anyone. Rather our purpose is to focus directly on the resource and to say what it cannot—bearing in mind that it can say much more than we are prone to suppose—in order that visitors may understand and appreciate the resource and the intangible values it represents. Interpretation that goes beyond this purpose is actually subversive, for it competes with the resource itself.

The urge to tell a story has spawned two secondary, closely related urges. One is the urge to recreate history. This results in what is popularly known as living history. Site managers all over the country are vying to see who can put together the most spectacular, and hence presumably the most "living," production. Costumed performers are firing muskets and cannon, dipping candles, forging horseshoes and cooking every variety of food by every variety of means known to our forebears. Some of these programs are entirely appropriate. Many are not. Park interpretation should assist visitors in gaining certain perceptions, understandings and appreciations of the park's resources. Living history programs that sharpen such perceptions are appropriate; those that blur them are inappropriate. Inappropriate living history, moreover, is not merely harmless diversion. The more "living" it is, the more likely it is to give visitors the strongest impression, and memory, of their park experience. Thus a program that is not unusually supportive of key interpretive objectives may be unusually distractive. It is of urgent importance that park officials critically examine the appropriateness of their living history programs.

The other secondary and related urge is the urge to reconstruct. As if preservation of the real thing were not difficult enough, we try to recreate that which has vanished and even (if such is possible) that which never existed at all. The former is dubious at best in these days of skyrocketing costs and austere budgets, but the latter is indefensible. Typical or suggestive representations of a general class of structures such as barns or log cabins or whole farms or villages are desired chiefly as stage settings for living history programs. There are three objections to these counterfeits. First, they purport to be accurate portrayals of past architecture but in fact almost never are. Second, no matter how often told, visitors still regard them as the genuine articles. And third, in a historical park, where nothing resembling them ever existed, they are offensive intrusions on the genuine historic setting.

Americans are blessed with several thousand historic places that are windows on their past. We have evolved fairly well-articulated principles and practices for their proper care. On balance, our record of stewardship is not one for which we need apologize. But we do need to be aware of the dangers of the four "urges" that are eroding the ideal. We must strive to honor the right of generations yet unborn to receive the tangible evidences of their heritage in unimpaired condition. HP

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Minute Man National Historical Park, Concord, Mass., where compromise with Mother Nature is reached. (National Park Service)